DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 243 980 UD 023 358

AUTHOR Edmonds, Ronald R.
TITLE Improving the Effectiveness of New York City Public Schools.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 10p.; For complete Conference Proceedings, see UD 023 356.
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Role; Elementary Secondary Education; *Improvement Programs; *Institutional Characteristics; *Program Implementation; *Research Utilization; *School Effectiveness; Student Promotion; Technical Assistance; *Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS *School Improvement Project (New York City)

ABSTRACT

In accordance with research into what makes schools effective, efforts were made to translate the findings into a school improvement project in the New York City Public Schools. The research isolated five characteristics of schools identified as effective (that is, as demonstrating for 3 years the ability to deliver basic school skills to the full range of its student population): (1) style of leadership in the school; (2) instructional emphasis; (3) school climate; (4) teacher expectations; and (5) presence of, use of, and response to standardized instruments for measuring student progress. The School Improvement Project is based exclusively on these five characteristics. For each school in the project, a needs assessment document is drawn up evaluating the school's relative strengths and weaknesses with respect to each of the five characteristics. The document is then used as a basis for making decisions about what kind of technical assistance the school needs to become effective. To reinforce what is essentially a school-based design for improvement, the central administration has to institutionalize its capacity to be a creditable, procedural, and substantive resource where schools can find the technical assistance they need. Along with the intervention program goes a prerequisite-for-promotion program, which provides opportunities for those students who are not promoted to correct their academic difficulties. (CMG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED243980

In: The Minority Student in Public Schools: Fostering Academic Excellence. Princeton, NJ, Educational Testing Service, Office for Minority Education, 1981.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Helen Weidenmiller

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

UD023358

IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Ronald R. Edmonds
Senior Assistant to the Chancellor for Instruction
*New York City Public Schools**

I have been asked to talk about my efforts to translate research I have done into a program for school reform in the country's largest school system. So I am going to summarize the research, in which I have enormous confidence, in about five minutes. Then I am going to spend a good deal longer talking about something in which I have a good deal less confidence. That topic is, How do you translate what you believe to be sound research conclusions into a program in which the intent is to modify the interaction between schools and the children in those schools who ordinarily do not profit from the way we do things?

In 1973 my colleagues at Harvard and I began a research project that collected income, social class, and family background data on all children in grades 3 through 7 in a number of schools and school systems in various places throughout the United States. We followed our collection of income and social class data by collecting achievement data on the same children for all the years they had been in school. We then analyzed the interaction between those data to find schools that had gone very far along the path of abolishing the traditional interaction between pupil performance and family background.

Effective schools defined

We began with the premise that we would nominate a school as being effective if, and only if, it could demonstrate for at least three years its ability to deliver basic school skills to the full range of its pupil population. The school populations we were studying had at least 16 percent poor children and ranged all the way to 99.9 percent poor children. We did succeed in finding numbers of elementary and

*Now Professor of Education, Michigan State University

UD023358

intermediate schools that were consistently effective in their abilities to deliver basic school skills, which we now call minimum competencies, to the full range of the pupil populations they serve. That was the identification part of the work.

After that aspect of the work, we went to a second set of questions that interested us. Since these effective schools do exist, and they exist in American cities throughout the United States, what is there about them that makes them that way, particularly when one compares them to other schools serving highly analogous pupil populations under highly similar institutional circumstances? What are the characteristics of the schools we determined to be effective that distinguish them from the schools we were compelled to identify as being ineffective? We did sufficient controls to be certain that, if we did identify institutional differences, those institutional, organizational characteristics would account for the difference. The variations in the character of the pupil population, the neighborhood, or the circumstances under which the schools functioned were insufficient to explain the dramatic achievement differences we consistently found across the city schools we were studying.

We concluded that the explanation derived from only five institutional characteristics. They were style of leadership in the school; instructional emphasis; climate of the school; implied expectations derived from the teachers in the classroom; and, finally, the presence and use of, and response to, standardized instruments for measuring pupil progress. Schools that had these five characteristics all together at the same time consistently represented the population of effective schools as contrasted to the population of ineffective schools. Remember that our definition of effectiveness is fixed almost exclusively on how well the school performs for that portion of its population that is poor. We never nominated a school as being effective, no matter how well its middle-class children did, unless the portion of the pupil population that was poor was achieving, at least proportionately, at a rate virtually identical to the achievement rate of the middle-class children.

Premises for New York City schools

I want to talk to you now about taking these conclusions out of the university and imposing them on school systems. The first thing I did

when I went to the city was to write and disseminate a pedagogical party line—the teaching and learning premises on which the New York City schools were to proceed from that point on. The premises were fairly few.

First, the New York City public schools presume that all the children in school are educable. Premise two is that the educability of the children derives far more from the nature of the school to which they are sent than from the nature of the family from which they come. If the research has taught us anything so far, it is that, while Coleman et al. are correct in the assertion that pupil performance is highly correlated with family background, they are profoundly incorrect in the conclusion that family background is the cause of pupil performance. This was one of the primary questions to which we addressed ourselves as researchers, and we answered it to our own satisfaction. We concluded that it is not the family background that determines pupil performance. The school response to family background determines pupil performance.

The controversial question is, What effect is most powerful in the analysis of achievement? Is the teacher effect most powerful, the familial effect most powerful, the school effect most powerful, or the district effect most powerful? We have concluded, pretty firmly, that the most powerful force at work in the issue of achievement is the school effect. That is, the school effect is much more powerful than the individual teacher effect. This statement is not meant in any way to dismiss teachers or to denigrate the critical character of their role in skills acquisition. It is merely to say—and I suspect your own experiences have long since demonstrated this—that poor schools are sufficiently powerful to depress otherwise creative, energetic, and productive instructional personnel. Conversely, instructionally effective schools are sufficiently powerful to raise otherwise mediocre people to levels of instructional effectiveness they might not ordinarily have thought they could aspire to.

School improvement project

New York City has more than 1,300 public schools. It was fairly clear that I was not going to be able to do what I wanted if I had to intervene in each one of those schools one at a time. I have enough difficulties just visiting them, let alone mounting a program in-

tended to intervene directly in them. I designed a School Improvement Project.

Through this project I entered the New York City schools with a program of intervention predicated exclusively on the school characteristics I referred to a few moments ago. I brought together a group of men and women as school liaison people. They have been trained in the import of these school characteristics and assigned to the schools participating in the School Improvement Project. Their job is to walk the administrative and instructional personnel of the school through an evaluation of the school's relative strength and weakness with respect to each of the characteristics to which I referred. The outcome of that examination we call a Needs Assessment Document. The document is prepared primarily by the liaison person, but in fairly close collaboration with a representative group of people convened in each participating school.

Each document talks with some specificity about the relative strength and weakness of the instructional leadership in the school, the relative strength and weakness of the instructional emphasis of the school, the relative strength and weakness of the climate of the school, and so on through all the characteristics. I then use these documents as a basis for making decisions about what kind of technical assistance would bring the school in line. Bear in mind that the premise from which all this proceeds is that any school that has obtained the five characteristics all at once would immediately begin to show very substantial improvement in skills acquisition for precisely that portion of the pupil population that ordinarily profits least from the way we approach teaching and learning in city schools. For example, if the Needs Assessment says the principal is found wanting in some aspect of instructional leadership, then I ask myself, "What can I do that would improve that principal's skills in the exercise of instructional leadership?" One of our very firm conclusions was that the principal of the school has to be the person the instructional personnel look to for instructional leadership in the system. If they do not, the implications for the school are considerably negative. We know that one of the measures of instructional leadership is that the principal has to visit the classes, systematically observe, and systematically respond to the observations. Therefore, if we discovered that the principal just never did that, I would assign a person to work with the principal to teach what he or she might need to know to be a sophisticated and consistent evaluator of teach-

er performance in the classroom. I might assign a retired principal with a 20-year record of incontestable success in his methodology of visiting classes, sorting out what he sees, and responding to it. Or if the Needs Assessment says that the teachers are insecure about their use of achievement data, I might assign to the school a professor of measurement and say that I want the teachers to participate in seminars on reading assessment data or evaluating achievement outcomes. Or I might assign a curriculum person because I want teachers trained better in how to use achievement data as a basis for program design, and so on.

This intervention does not alter per-pupil expenditure, does not add in any permanent way to the resources with which the school works, does not reduce class size, and does not add to the repertoire of services the school has to offer. It merely sets out to help the school people see ways to make better use of the resources already there.

A part of this intervention, though, is trying to make the central administration more receptive to the implications of our conclusions about school effects. Very few people in central administration in city schools in the United States give creditable instructional assistance even when instructional personnel request it. Therefore, one of the prerequisites to progress is to make the central administration a repository of reliable, creditable, consistent technical assistance persons.

Prerequisites for promotion

I have designed in the New York schools a program, which will take effect in September, that says children may not be promoted from any one grade to the next grade unless they can demonstrate, on the basis of objective data, their mastery of a sufficient minimum of school skills to permit us to predict that if they move on to the next grade they will be successful. If data will not permit us to make that prediction, then we cannot move them. In New York City this will remain the primary responsibility of the 32 decentralized districts. In New York City we centrally control curriculum and budget, but 32 decentralized districts control the elementary and intermediate schools. Each district serves somewhat less than 30,000 children. Each district elects its own board, and the board hires its own super-

intendent and the teachers are hired from a central list. We give them a central budget allocation.

In this promotion program, you are denied the discretion of promoting exclusively on the basis of teacher judgment. To promote you must have objective evidence of pupil mastery of the minimum skills of which we all hear so much. I have also said that in the fourth grade and seventh grade, no matter what the decentralized district does, the central administration will itself administer the citywide test in reading, writing, and math and interpret the results itself. This in a sense verifies whether or not the decentralized districts' criteria for promotion are in conformity with what is implied by the statement that no child is to move unless and until that child can demonstrate sufficient mastery of the bodies of knowledge and sets of skills that in the third grade are prerequisite for predictable success in the fourth grade.

Many of you may be thinking that there is no justification for nonpromotion if all you can offer children is a repeat of what they just did. I understand that. One of the characteristics of the program is the understanding that children, particularly in the fourth and seventh grades, who do not get promoted will have the opportunity to participate in a program designed to correct the academic difficulties that constitute the objective explanation for why they did not get promoted.

Central administration a substantive resource

I have made remarks about the program to illustrate the sorts of things that ought to be done in central administration to reinforce what is essentially a school-based design for improvement. My goal is that eventually all the schools in New York City will have their own school improvement programs and not have to participate in a project for that to be true. To do that, central administration has to institutionalize its capacity to be a creditable, procedural, and substantive resource. We walk a school through an evaluation of its relative strength and weakness with respect to the characteristics I have mentioned and then make the important decision about what repertoire of technical resources need to be assigned in response to such deficiency as may have been found. I will also use these experiences to evaluate what kinds of men and women representing what

kinds of skills are needed to become a permanent part of the curriculum division. This will eventually permit any one of the 1,300 schools to decide for itself who it wants in its own school improvement project. Then a school can turn to the central administration and say that it has determined that these and these are the kinds of technical assistance this particular school needs to make better use of the resources it already has.

I am happy to report that, thus far, I have substantial endorsement for this approach in the city. I have editorial endorsement from major newspapers including the *Times*; major universities have publicly proclaimed their endorsements; foundations have sent along letters of endorsement. The American Federation of Teachers has said that it will publicly cooperate in this design and approach to intervention. I do not want to imply that the relationship between us is one of sweetness and light, as that is not the case. But at least, so far, we might have what Franklin Roosevelt called "armed neutrality." So we will see whether or not we end up shooting at each other.

I am cautiously optimistic. I do have very substantial confidence in our conclusions. I am not as confident in the design of the intervention, but I think that it makes some sense.

Incidentally, the Milwaukee Public Schools are also doing a school improvement project based on my research. They have chosen to approach it in a somewhat different way. Those of you who have colleagues and friends in Milwaukee may want to pay some attention to the progress of their intervention since it is based on precisely the same conclusions I have been describing.

Education the instrument of equity?

In conclusion, this reference to schools that teach all their children what their parents want them to know, when they send them to school, is not theoretical and does not derive from moral persuasion. It is a discovery as contrasted to an invention. My conclusion in that regard derives from the fact that effective schools do in fact exist and they exist right now. The second conclusion I draw is that the existence of these schools raises the question, Why aren't they all like that? My own answer to the question is that we happen to live in a society that values some of its people much more than it values others. Educators, like all other social servants, serve those they

think they must and, when they think they need not, they do not. Unfortunately most of the children who do not get these services, in general, and education in particular, happen to be members of politically impotent groups—children who are either poor, of color, or both. But schools do exist that can solve the problem. The existence of those schools means that it is realistic to suppose that all of them could be like that. And, finally, I would say that whether or not our social order ever makes education the instrument of equity of which it is capable probably depends on how you feel about the fact that we have not done that so far.